

Impact of Mahatma Gandhi on the Life of Dr. Martin Luther King Junior

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Abstract:

Mahatma Gandhi was one of the greatest freedom fighters of India who with his philosophy of nonviolent satyagraha and ahimsa shaped the freedom struggle of India. Prior to his odyssey in India he also lived in South Africa and witnessed racial discrimination against non-whites and Indian population. He stood up against injustice and racial oppression there and started non violent movement there and as an act of defiance against apartheid rule he formed the Natal Indian Congress in 1894 A.D.. He continued his struggle in South Africa from 1893 to 1914 and became the mass leader of South African Indian community. He returned to India in 1915 A.D. and joined the freedom struggle and within few years he became the face of the mass movement. Under his leadership not only educated and elite people joined the struggle for Indian independence but also the marginalized section of society like peasants, workers, and women played an active role. He was not only a freedom fighter but also a great social reformer. He raised his voice against the evils of casteism, untouchability, gender discrimination and advocated measures for their uplifting. His struggle inspired many of his contemporaries around the world and his method of non-violence was seen as the most effective weapon to combat draconian laws all around the world. One of the people whom Gandhi influenced considerably was Martin Luther King Junior and he referred to Gandhi as “the little brown saint.” In this paper we will assess the struggles of Martin Luther and how Gandhi’s ideas helped him in combating the evils of racial discrimination and social injustice meted out to the people of color in America.

Keywords:

discrimination, odyssey, struggle, injustice, oppression, untouchability, leadership, marginalized, draconian etc

Gandhi was an inspirational leader and his greatness doesn't lie in the fact that he was a freedom fighter but rather in the fact that he inspired millions of people and made them understand the value of resistance through non violence civil disobedience. He led from the front and practiced himself what he preached. His ideas were and are appreciated by leading people of his times and later like Albert Einstein, G.B. Shaw, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, Nelson Mandela and others. In this particular paper we will discuss how Martin Luther King was inspired from him and how Gandhi's philosophy helped him in his resistance against racial segregation and his fight against the same without hurting anyone physically and corrupting his conscience. Martin Luther himself admitted that from Christianity he learned his ideals and from

Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929 A.D in Atlanta, Georgia in the house of Alberta Christine and Michael King who was a civil rights activist. Martin's father was pastor in Ebenezer Baptist Church and would give sermon to the congregation of hundreds and

thousands of Christian followers. In 1934 Michael was sent on a tour to different nations like Egypt, Rome, Jerusalem, Tunisia and finally Berlin where he was scheduled to meet for Baptist World Alliance. At that time Berlin was ruled by National Socialist Workers Party which was popularly known as Nazi party. There Martin witnessed the racial discrimination against Jews and there Baptist Alliance condemned racism of every type including anti-semitism. He also visited the sites which were associated with Martin Luther, the protestant reformist of Germany, and he felt an inspiration within him imbibed from the struggles of Luther. On his return back home he changed his name to Martin Luther Senior and his son's to Martin Luther King Junior.

Martin Luther King Jr. is mostly remembered for standing up vociferously against Jim Crow Laws which were implemented in southern states of America and enforced racial segregation there and were achingly discriminatory in nature. In America the black citizens were living in very deplorable conditions and laws were not helping them either. The army of America was already segregated and even after the civil war of America, in which blacks fought alongside Union Army, their condition remained unaltered. President Woodrow Wilson who himself was from south and had more than once justified the racial discrimination discreetly had started segregation in federal workplaces. Jim crow laws mandated through constitutional means that blacks and whites were not on equal ranks and thereby dictated separation of whites and blacks and African Americans were casted out as second class citizens. Some of the etiquettes which were mentioned in those laws are here as under:

- A black person was not to sit on front seat if a white person is driving vehicle and in public transport they were supposed to sit on last seats.
- People of African-American heritage were not supposed to dine with whites in hotels, restaurants or public dining places. If supposedly there was any place which served both whites and blacks then there was a general rule that whites would have to be served first and there should definitely be some sort of partition between them so that it may not cause any sort of inconvenience to white customers.
- A black person was not supposed to offer his hand to white person for greeting as it would imply his socially equal status.
- Black people were not supposed to show any sort of disrespect to white folks and nor were they supposed to imply that white man was lying or is of or belongs to inferior class.
- Black people were not supposed to show affections towards each other in public places and they were also supposed not to laugh on white people.

Martin Luther certainly had gift of gab and during his doctoral studies in systematic theology at Boston University he impressed his peers with his wide range of knowledge and capability to articulate his thoughts meticulously. He became pastor at the age of 25 in 1954 at Montgomery, Alabama in the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Although he was a well known figure amidst his folks and hometown yet he came to prominence as a leader and civil rights activist post Montgomery Bus Incident in 1955. The rotten Jim Crow laws were at force back then and they regulated that blacks had to take back seats in public transports. On December 15, 1955, Rosa Parks, women of forty two years of age, violated those laws by sitting on one of the front seats and refusing to give that seat to a white person. She was subsequently arrested and this created a huge uproar among the colored populace of America and chaos

erupted in Alabama. It was there that Martin Luther appeared on the scene and he took the burden of carrying this movement on his shoulders. This incident also helped black folks to organize on a wide scale in order to push back and fight against these reprehensible draconian laws and stereotypes. They started a movement which was termed as Montgomery Bus Boycott and Martin Luther King Jr. was appointed to lead this cause.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott movement became a foundational mile stone in the history of America for civil rights movement and black folks refused to take bus services in there. The movement was effective as there was a considerable loss of riders to the transit system which eventually led to financial loss and economic distress. The response to this boycott by white folks was unpleasant and often times violent. They made white Citizens Council in response and they often identified boycotters and used to attack them violently. It was here that Martin Luther ignited in his followers a fire for struggle so that they could strive to attain their objective. He called on black folks to use non violent methods in order to combat violence. He preached them that by having vindictive mindset they would be falling into the traps laid by racists and if blacks resorted to violent methods they would merely be playing as pawns in the hands of white men which would have an adverse impact on movement. He even said to them that no matter what white folks do to them they must always love them as white people are also their brothers. He said to them that they must always spread love even to those who hate you. His constant preaching's and speeches had a huge impact on his supporters and they were ready to sweat in for a longer period. Martin was arrested and he had to spend a fortnight in jail. His house was bombed and he was forced to give up this movement but he never backed down from the task he was given with. The boycott which started under his leadership continued for 382 days and finally the federal district court declared in case *Browder vs. Gayle*, on June 5, 1956, that the segregation laws in Alabama were unconstitutional. The dissenters went to Supreme Court but unto no avail as the chief Court also upheld the ruling of district court on November 13, 1956.

After continuous struggle of black folks for 382 day under the leadership of Martin Luther, finally on December 20, 1956 the boycott was officially ended. This boycott and movement became a stepping stone in the life of Martin Luther to fight for the cause of his folks on various fronts and lead the struggle heads on. The movement gave him not only national but international recognition. He was made president of the Christian organization which was Southern Christian Leadership Conference and under his leadership the SCLC led many protests and boycotts wherever injustice was done on the people of color. In 1963 he was successful in organizing a march into the streets of Washington D.C. and there on the pedestals of Lincoln Memorial he gave the famous "I Have a Dream" speech. He used to organize protests in a non-violent way and the group discussed beforehand where they would protest and the tactics they would employ in these agitations. In 1964 he was awarded with Nobel Peace Prize for his arduous campaign to fight systematic racism prevalent in America and leading such nationwide protests through non violent methods.

Martin Luther Jr. was very much impressed and inspired by what happened in India under the stout leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. He was introduced to Gandhi when he was in Boston University and initially he wasn't that much into following the practice of non-violent methods. He was a preacher in the community of blacks and he witnessed violence there oftentimes. He learned the art of self defense and there are records which mention that he also used to have gun in his home for defense in case of any attack. He was asked to learn non

violent methods from Gandhi by two civil rights activists who were Glenn Smiley and Harris Wofford. He had a regular advisory in the form of Bayard Rustin who would advise him continuously on non violent methods. But it was the teachings of Gandhi which had profound impact on his mind and inspired him to lead mass protests and agitations sans violence.

When King Jr. learned about Gandhi and found out how this man who wore only a strap of white cloth on his body was able to inspire millions of people in India to raise the banner of revolt and was able to win freedom for his country and that too by employing the weapon of non-violence. King was a devout Christian firstly and he saw in Mahatma the spirit of Jesus Christ and called him as one of the sheep of Jesus Christ. He compared Mahatma with Jesus Christ and Abraham Lincoln and said that just like those two who gave their lives for the cause of truth and to heal the wounds of a divided nation, Gandhi also gave his life for the same cause. He was so much impressed by the life and teachings of Gandhi that he wanted to personally go to the land of India which bore such a great man like Gandhi. Finally he visited India on April 1959 with the help from funds collected by his friends, colleagues and peers.

His visit to India was received by huge audience and he was welcomed in the country by open hands. Upon his arrival he stated in a press conference that “To other countries I may go as a tourist but to India I come as a pilgrim.” He also visited Rajghat to pay a visit to the Samadhi and knelt there to pay obeisance to the great man. He met with the then President and Prime Minister of India, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan and Jawahar Lal Nehru respectively as they were close associates of Gandhi. It was long after the death of Martin Luther that his wife Coretta King said that her husband, Martin, on that day said that it felt like he was meeting Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and James Madison collectively on a single day. During his itinerary in India Martin visited many of the friends and colleagues of Gandhi and asked them about their memories and they in turn blessed him to spread the Gandhian way of life and his teachings far abroad.

Martin Luther King was immensely motivated by his Indian visit and on his return to America he spoke about his experiences in India. The Gandhian method of non-violence and satyagraha, fight for the truth, found deep resonance in the struggle of his folks and he employed these tactics once again for fighting oppression and racism there. He said to his people to take inspiration from the struggle of Gandhi as he was a man who had no army of his own but yet he was able to liberate his country from the greatest empire of the world at that time and that too without even picking a stone. He said that the Gandhian method of love and non-violence are most lethal weapons to stand against tyrannical and oppressive regime. He deployed those methods successfully and became the symbol of nonviolent agitations all over America. The movement that he started in Montgomery spread like a wild fire and people of color used to travel a long distance in order to join King. By 1960's the methods employed by Martin were founding favor in deep south and hundreds and thousands of black students and folks started to protest and picketed dining houses and stores which were racially segregated. The black folks were also joined by liberal white activists who believed in racial equality and stood firmly with them. It was due to the strenuous efforts of Martin Luther King and millions of other people of color that Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed. The act prohibited racial discrimination of any kind and dictated that no one would indulge in segregation in public places and equal opportunities would be offered in terms of employment and outlawed discrimination based on color, race, gender and nationality.

Conclusion:

Both Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther were reformists and activists who were hell-bent to improve the conditions of their people and liberate them from the yokes of slavery and oppression. Martin was a great admirer of Gandhi and used the weapons employed by Gandhi in the freedom struggle of India to his own cause for liberating the people of color in America from racial discrimination and by bringing a change in social dynamics. The black community was racially segregated and was living in grubby conditions. King took cue from the Gandhian method of nonviolence and love and started spreading the message of love and respect. Inspired by Gandhi he became the greatest advocate of nonviolence and stated that this nonviolence is the greatest weapon to combat all the evils and providing respect and socially equal status to the people of color in America. Both Gandhi and Martin never met each other but they were destined to succumb by the same evil which they abhorred the most-violence. The radicals who took the lives of these great personalities forgot one thing that it is easy to kill the body but not the soul. The teachings and ideas propounded by both these men are still with us and they are still guiding humanity to raise their voice against injustice and oppression.